



The Pivot I Didn't Choose (And Why I'm Grateful for It)



There's a particular kind of panic that comes with watching your visa expiration date approach while your role is being made redundant. It's the kind that makes you apply for jobs you never imagined doing, in industries you know nothing about, because staying in the country matters more than staying in your field.

That's how I went from product designer to cafe supervisor in a matter of weeks.

When Your Career Path Becomes a Survival Strategy

I had already made one big transition - from software engineer to product designer - and felt like I'd finally found my footing. Then the ground shifted. Redundancy. Visa constraints. The clock ticking. Suddenly, career planning became about immediate survival rather than long-term growth.

So, I took a role as a cafe supervisor with exactly zero hospitality experience.

([I wrote about what Bridge Baker meant to me](#) when I left - it's a story of scrambling, kindness, and finding purpose when I felt completely lost.)

For seven months, I learned to pull espresso shots, manage opening and closing procedures, handle difficult customers, coordinate teams during rushes, and keep a smile on my face during twelve-hour shifts. My colleagues in tech were sympathetic but confused. Some people in my life saw it as a step backward. *I saw it as the only step available.*

What Nobody Tells You About Hospitality

Here's what I didn't expect: I learned more about product design in those seven months than I had in some full years in tech.

In hospitality, feedback is immediate and unfiltered. A customer's face tells you everything you need to know about whether you've met their needs. There's no A/B testing, no analytics dashboard, no week-long sprint reviews. You see the impact of your decisions - your tone, your efficiency, your problem-solving - in real time. You iterate on the spot.

Every shift was a masterclass in understanding people: what they need versus what they say they need, how stress affects behaviour, why small details matter enormously,

how to de-escalate tension, when to follow the process and when to break it to make someone's day better.

These weren't abstract user personas in a Figma file. These were real people, tired after work, celebrating birthdays, having difficult conversations, seeking comfort in a familiar routine. I learned to read micro-expressions, to anticipate needs before they were voiced, to design experiences moment by moment.

A Different Kind of Female Leadership

One thing struck me immediately: women were everywhere in leadership. The owner, the HR manager, the operations manager, the assistant manager, most of the team leaders and supervisors - all women.

I'd been in tech long enough to become accustomed to often being the only woman in certain meetings, to being mindful about how I communicated in leadership contexts. These weren't failings of any particular company or team - just the reality of working in an industry still finding its balance.

In the cafe, women ran things at every level. They made strategic decisions, managed operations, delegated work, handled conflicts, and it felt utterly unremarkable. It wasn't that hospitality had solved sexism - far from it. But seeing female leadership as the norm rather than the exception, from the very top down to the floor, gave me a glimpse into a different dynamic.

It made me realize how much mental energy I'd been using just navigating those dynamics in tech - energy I didn't even know I was spending until I experienced an environment where I didn't have to. We don't recognize how much invisible work we sometimes do without even noticing.

My Last Day

On my last day at the cafe, something happened that I still think about.

Customers came in specifically to say goodbye. People who could have gone to any coffee shop in the area made the trip just to wish me well. They told me I'd made their mornings better, that they'd miss seeing me, that the place wouldn't be the same.

I was overwhelmed. These weren't colleagues I'd worked alongside for years. These were people I'd served coffee to, people I'd exchanged pleasantries with during rushed mornings, people whose names I sometimes knew and sometimes didn't.

But I'd been present. I'd remembered their orders. I'd asked about their days and actually listened. I'd noticed when they seemed off and checked in. I'd made their experience - even in a simple transaction - feel human.

That's when it crystallized: This is what product design should be. Not designing for "users" or "target demographics," but for actual humans whose days we have the privilege of improving.

Coming Full Circle

By the time I left the café to join Redgate as a Product Designer, I'd been named Employee of the Month and was being considered for promotion to branch manager. Not bad for someone who started with no hospitality experience.

I now advocate for user research with the conviction of someone who's lived on the front lines of customer experience. I push back on assumptions with the confidence of someone who knows that data doesn't capture everything - that sometimes you need to look someone in the eye to understand what they actually need.

The detour wasn't a setback. It was an education I couldn't have gotten any other way.

If This Is You Right Now

If you're facing your own unexpected pivot - whether from visa pressures, redundancy, burnout, or simply life throwing you a curveball - here's what I learned:

Resilience isn't about bouncing back unchanged. It's about adapting, learning, and becoming something different than you were. Sometimes stronger, sometimes softer, always more complete.

Your "unrelated" experience isn't unrelated. Every role that puts you in contact with people, with systems, with problems that need solving, is teaching you something about design. Stay curious about what those lessons are.

Customer-facing work is design work. If you're solving problems for people in real time, you're designing experiences. The medium doesn't matter as much as the mindset.

Career paths aren't linear, and that's okay. The narrative of steady upward progression is a myth that serves no one. Growth looks different for everyone, and sometimes it looks like serving lattes while you figure out your next move.

Adaptability is your superpower. In tech, we talk about pivoting products. Sometimes you need to pivot yourself. The ability to learn new skills quickly, to thrive in unfamiliar environments, to find the throughlines between seemingly disparate experiences - that's the real competitive advantage.

The Unexpected Gift

I didn't choose to work in hospitality. Circumstances chose it for me. But those seven months gave me something I didn't know I was missing: a reminder that behind every

interface, every user flow, every design decision, there are real people living real lives, looking for moments of connection, efficiency, and yes, occasionally, joy.

They taught me that good design - whether it's a coffee order system or a software feature - makes people feel seen.

Now when I'm designing at Redgate, I think about those customers who came to say goodbye. I think about what made them feel that connection. And I try to build that same sense of presence, attention, and care into everything I create.

The detour didn't take me off course. It gave me a compass I didn't know I needed.